

Family Welcome

Exploring inclusive museum
experiences with young
children and families



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Executive Summary

The Family Welcome Project used participatory research approaches to explore inclusive museum experiences for families with children aged 0-3. Data was generated with fifteen families over a six month extended engagement period. Using the Mosaic Approach, the study identified four key aspects of welcome: Building, Collection, Atmosphere, and Experience. Findings emphasize the importance of physical spaces, meaningful object connections, unhurried exploration, and social opportunities. Recommendations include improved wayfinding, family-friendly spaces, staff training, community partnerships, and specialized programming for the youngest visitors to enhance cultural engagement and belonging.



Why Focus on Families?

Childhood lasts a lifetime. The experiences we have in our earliest years with our families shape our identities, attitudes, and understanding of ourselves and others. Museums can support this by offering nurturing experiences that help families connect and learn together.

- Family visits to museums are the strongest predictor of continued cultural engagement into adulthood (Dilenschneider, 2019). High quality family provision is therefore key to sustainable audience development.
- Positive experiences in early childhood have been shown to have long lasting impacts on narrowing health inequalities, promoting social skills, and academic success (Lehrl, Evangelou and Sammons, 2022), and as such this work contributes to wider aspirations around social justice and tackling inequalities
- Encouraging visits from a more diverse range of families offers an opportunity to diversify museums' core audiences, which are currently more likely to be white (Office for National Statistics, 2018), able-bodied (The Audience Agency, 2018) and from upper socioeconomic groups (DCMS, 2016) than members of the general population
- Family visitors tend to be drawn from the local area and are often loyal repeat visitors (The Audience Agency, 2018). Family visitors consistently have a higher-than-average secondary spend in gift shops and cafes (Kids in Museums, 2020)

Research Questions

What does a great Family Welcome at the Fitzwilliam Museum look like?

How can we develop our understanding of participatory research and co-creation with young children?

How can our findings support staff across the museum to feel informed, confident, and proud in our work with families?

Approach

The project was built on a praxeological action research framework (Pascal and Bertram, 2012). In order to hear the 'voices' of pre-verbal children within the dialogue, the Mosaic Approach (Clark, 2017) was used to generate data through 'pedagogically appropriate' (Wall, 2018) tools. Data analysis used a reflective thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

At the heart of the project were 15 families with children aged 0-3 years - the Family Welcome Ambassadors. They engaged with the Museum over a six month period, taking part in a series of activities, creating data via discussions, play, scrapbooking, and photography. Parents were offered tools to help them notice and document their children's engagement and received bursaries to carry out independent research visits.

Additional Activities

6 hours Entrance Observations

Community outreach with 133 participants

Working Group with 21 colleagues from 6 departments

In depth scoping conversations with 9 museums and sector support organisations

Ethics

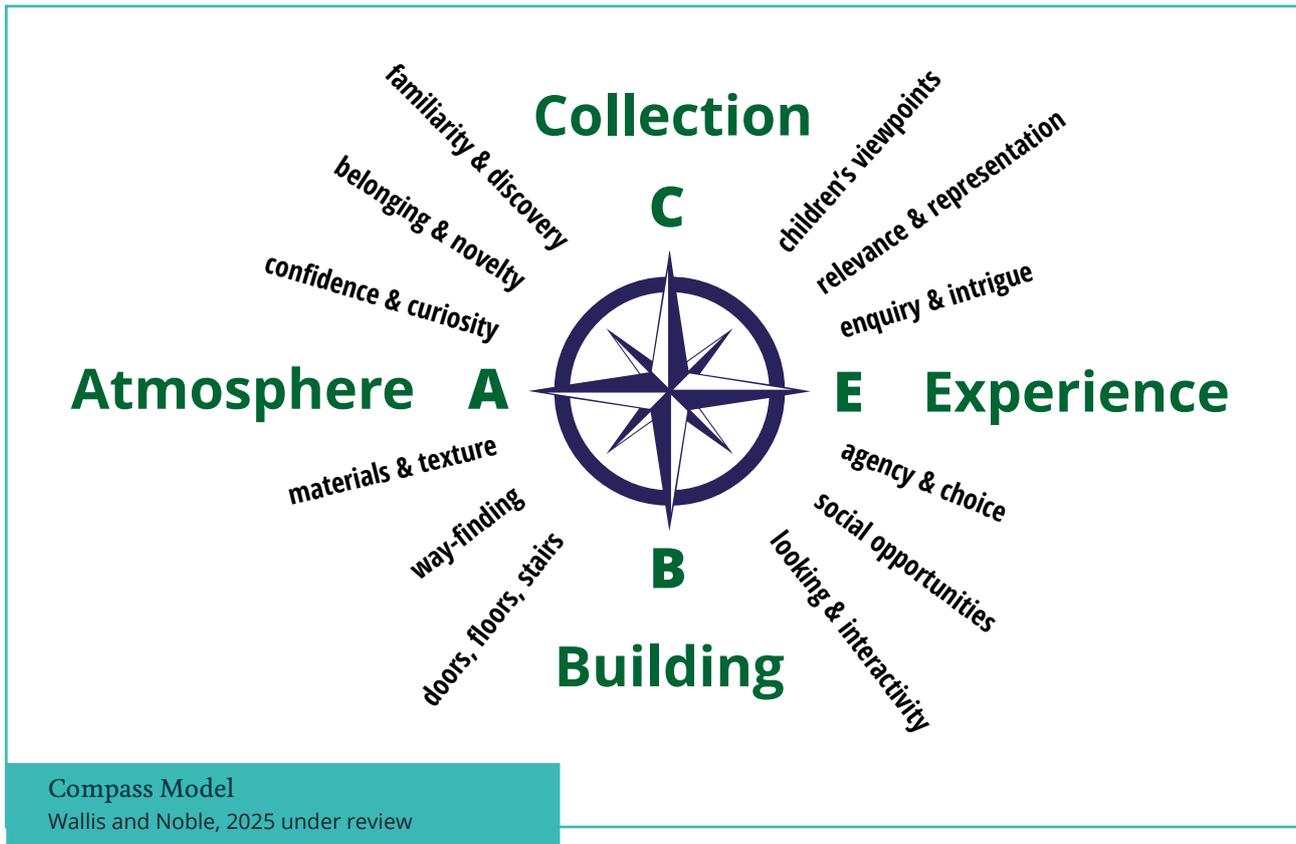
The project followed the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (Bertram et al., 2015) and was compliant with all University and Museum guidelines around ethical research and data storage and sharing.

Findings

Collaborative data analysis identified 4 key themes:

Collection, Experience, Building and Atmosphere.

These findings extend previous early childhood research at the Museum, which emphasised the importance of embodied experiences in building a sense of belonging (Wallis and Noble, 2022) and the affordances of museums as spaces of care and nurture for families (Wallis and Noble, 2023).



These four themes provide a useful framing for thinking about how to make the most of the unique affordances of the museum to improve the welcome for families.



Looking at ceramics

Aspects of Welcome

A Welcoming Building

- Staircases, floors, doorways and thresholds are important spaces
- Babies and young children are sensitive to the sound, light, textures, smells and temperature changes in galleries.

Families enjoy the physicality of the building and appreciate being somewhere different from their everyday spaces.

The scale and design of museums can be imposing, but the building can contribute to a sense of nurture and belonging, enabling children and adults to slow down, take notice, and employ sensory and physical ways of knowing. The public nature of the Museum building is important in enacting cultural citizenship as a collaborative practice.

A Welcoming Collection

- Engagement with objects is enriching and memorable for families
- Children are drawn to a diverse range of objects
- Collection objects provide points of connection for joint engagement and relationship building.

Families are excited by the collection. Both children and adults make personal connections with objects that they find meaningful.

Art objects hold traces of human interaction with material that connects us with a human and more-than-human community beyond our immediate surroundings. Families become a part of this community through their interactions with the collection. In this way, museum experiences can offer a sense of both independence and connection.

A Welcoming Atmosphere

- Families appreciate feeling unhurried
- There is a balance between a feeling of familiarity and novelty
- Families like to feel that Museum 'sees' and understands them.

Families appreciate the sense of freedom to explore and make new discoveries. This feels refreshing and different to everyday routines and activities.

Museums are portals through which we can leave behind everyday experiences – they are different from homes, schools, and other places where we spend our time, and this can support innovative ways of thinking and being together.

A Welcoming Experience

- Adults can be learners and children can take the lead
- They appreciate outreach activities that they can connect with in community settings
- Museums can provide a refuge from daily routines and challenges

Social opportunities are an important part of museum visiting for families.

Museums offer an opportunity to be yourself, and to connect with others. Families who might find it challenging to engage with settings with more clearly defined patterns of engagement can flourish in museums.

Recommendations

What families tell us about how to build on current strengths and develop future provision



Looking at paintings together

“We can have time exploring and follow the child. Allows me to look [at] things in a different way.”

Parent Co-Researcher

Building - a place we can explore

We want to make the most of the amazing museum building.

Help us feel confident by:

- Improving wayfinding with maps, signage and floor labels
- Creating designated spaces for buggy parking, eating, and rest.
- Providing clear orientation and a warm welcome in entrance areas

Collection - objects we can connect with

Lots of us who have never visited don't know what's in the Museum.

Tell us what to expect by:

- Making the permanent collection more well known among families locally.
- When we're visiting, we all want to learn! Develop existing resources to support families to engage with key objects and themes
- Encourage more in-gallery interactivity via VE teams and interpretation

Atmosphere - a place we can be ourselves

We come to the Museum to have new experiences together. We want you to know how important this is for our children.

You can support us by:

- Training staff to support children's learning
- Partnering with local organisations that we already trust
- Promoting the potential of the museum to a broad range of families and in multiple languages

Experience - people we can connect with

Babyhood is a great time for us to get involved with museums: we might be on parental leave and are actively looking for things to do with others.

- Prioritise specialist provision for babies and the youngest children
- Being a parent can be lonely, especially for those of us who are already marginalised.
- Increase the range of programming for different age groups and preferences
- Enable relationship building and connection through extended engagement opportunities

Next Steps

The Family Welcome Project continues through the following outputs:

- Family Friendly Drop In sessions
- Mini and Me Volunteering Opportunities
- Warm Welcome for Young Children and Families Training Module
- Dissemination through practitioner networks, conferences, peer-reviewed publications
- Practice sharing and support for 20+ other museums and organisations
- Convening a new international, cross-disciplinary Special Interest Group with EECERA focused on Young Children's Arts and Cultural Experiences

"We've learnt that even at a very young age we really do love all types of art."

Parent Co-Researcher

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